

**THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**  
**OF**  
**GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS**  
**AT**  
**UNC – CHAPEL HILL**  
*(GTA Guidelines)*

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## INTRODUCTION

Graduate teaching assistants (TAs) are important members of the University's instructional community. They provide an invaluable service simply by teaching. TAs enhance the influence of the faculty, permitting the faculty to reach many more undergraduate students than their own time and resources would allow. They also provide undergraduates in introductory courses with regular, personalized instruction. In addition, as higher education institutions renew their emphasis on undergraduate education, teaching expertise becomes an essential asset for graduate students entering the job market.

Because of the importance of graduate students' teaching responsibilities here and as future faculty members, serious consideration is to be given to how we develop and evaluate teaching expertise in the context of graduate education. At UNC-Chapel Hill departments are encouraged to develop their own programs to prepare their graduate students for teaching. Although these programs have several elements in common, each program is unique and, therefore, incorporates the special requirements and resources of its home department. Moreover, these departmentally-based programs not only prepare graduate students for teaching but also contribute to the vitality of departments by fostering collegiality and intellectual exchange among faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates.

Professional development programs for graduate students bring other indirect benefits to departments and the University. Among these is better preparation of undergraduates and more efficient support for faculty. Another less obvious benefit is the enhanced reputation of the University, in the State and nationally.

In order to prepare graduate students for their responsibilities as TAs and future faculty members, departments, with the ongoing support of the Center for Teaching and Learning, develop and maintain professional development programs that also reflect the unique circumstances and culture of each department.

In order to ensure fairness, open communication, adequacy of preparation for instructional roles, and ongoing professional development, these *Guidelines* propose common standards and a common foundation for these departmentally-based programs. These *Guidelines* address selection, assignment (with increasing scope of responsibilities), training, supervision, and evaluation of teaching assistants.

## TEACHING ASSISTANT RESPONSIBILITIES

Within departments, TAs perform a variety of roles related to teaching that represent different levels of independence and direct contact with students. With accompanying training, these roles constitute an apprenticeship in teaching. During the course of their graduate education, TAs should progress from closely supervised work to less closely supervised assignments in the instructional program. Some highly qualified graduate students may (under the supervision of a faculty member) assume responsibility for their own course or, more rarely, coordinate the activities of other TAs. Departments are encouraged whenever possible to provide graduate

students with incremental experiences in teaching as they progress through their graduate program.

The following are descriptions of the roles and responsibilities commonly performed by TAs in departments. The generic term “Teaching Assistant” (TA) refers to all graduate students as classified by any one of the following:

- As **Instructional Assistants**, graduate students are primarily involved in assisting an instructor of a course. In this capacity, the Assistant would rarely give a formal presentation to the class and although some assessment of work may be performed, the instructor has the responsibility of assigning grades.
- As **Teaching Associates**, graduate students are involved in some classroom, recitation, or laboratory teaching but do not have the full responsibility of a class as described below for a Teaching Fellow.
- As **Teaching Fellows**, graduate students have full responsibility for a section of a multi-section course, or, less commonly, a freestanding course, Teaching Fellows have primary responsibility for teaching a course for credit and /or for assigning final grades.
- As **Senior Teaching Fellows**, graduate students may coordinate the activities of other Teaching Assistants or have full responsibility for a course including curricular design.

## SELECTION AND ASSIGNMENT

In order to ensure that graduate students are qualified for their roles as TAs, the following minimum guidelines are provided:

- 1. Only enrolled graduate students who are in good academic standing are eligible for teaching assistantships;**
- 2. Only enrolled graduate students who demonstrate oral proficiency in English are eligible for appointment as a Teaching Associate or a Teaching Fellows;**
- 3. Teaching Fellows must have earned at least 18 graduate semester hours in their teaching discipline prior to their appointment.**
- 4. Graduate School Handbook: Graduate students do not normally teach other graduate students from the same department. Curricula, departments or schools may apply for exceptions to this policy on a case-by-case basis by submitting a request to the Graduate School for evaluation. In such cases, a full-time faculty member must be designated as the graduate student's teaching supervisor and the instructor of record.**

Exceptions may be made only in individual cases based on criteria such as outstanding professional experience, commensurate work experience, and demonstrated contributions to the teaching discipline in lieu of formal academic preparation. Such exceptions must be documented.

Clear procedures for the selection and assignment of graduate students as TAs prevent misunderstandings about and inequities in the allocation of departmental resources to graduate students. Department should have written guidelines made available to their graduate students for the selection and assignment of teaching assistants that are consistent and fair. To ensure a common understanding of responsibilities, departments should offer each TA a contract at the

time of assignment that clearly specifies the expectation of the position the graduate student will fill. Departments, with the support of the Center for Teaching and Learning, should offer all graduate students additional training to prepare them for their increasing responsibilities in the different teaching assistant roles.

## **TRAINING**

Because teaching expertise represents a set of skills and attitudes acquired through training and experience, preparation for and practice in teaching is the core of a responsible professional development program for TAs. Departments should provide ongoing training to ensure that their graduate students are adequately prepared for their responsibilities as teaching assistants. For Teaching Fellows, this training should include a systematic preparation for full course responsibility, covering course design and planning, instructional methods, evaluation, and grading, offered either prior or concurrent with their appointment. The Center for Teaching and Learning will assist departments in developing these training programs, coordinate an orientation to teaching for all new TAs in the fall and spring, and provide some additional complementary training for departments that require it.

## **SUPERVISION AND EVALUATION**

To enhance the training and teaching experience provided by the department, departments should assign all TAs a faculty member who provides ongoing supervision and mentoring during their appointment. Departments should also develop a procedure for providing feedback to TAs on their teaching. The procedure should include at least one observation of, and a follow-up consultation with, all Teaching Associates and Teaching Fellows during each semester of their appointment. All first time Teaching Associates and Teaching Fellows should have at least two such evaluations and follow-up consultations. Further, all Teaching Associates and Teaching Fellows should be evaluated by their students each semester that they teach. The Center for Teaching and Learning can assist departments in the development of these evaluation instruments and provide training for faculty members supervising TAs.

## **RECOGNITION**

Several University teaching award programs recognize TAs for their performance in the classroom. Department are encouraged to develop ways of recognizing outstanding contributions in their disciplines to teaching by TAs.

## **SUPPORT TO DEPARTMENTAL PROGRAMS FROM THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY**

The Office of the Provost through the resources of the Graduate School and the Center for Teaching and Learning will regularly monitor the professional development programs and the compliance to these *Guidelines* by all units in the University.